

# The Ethical Egg

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Politics and government have long been muddied by a chicken-or-egg issue. Which came first, *people with good morals* or *the just institutions that nurture good people?*

Economist and social theorist Deirdre N. McCloskey surprised me, just a bit, by coming down hard on one side of the question last week.

"It is ethics, good or bad, that guides pretty much all human relationships, from a marriage or a small circle of friends to a sports team, a business, or a nation-state," she wrote, adding that "well-designed laws, courts, catechisms, extrinsic motives, social approval, and even a few good and decent people are of no avail if too many people do not behave like self-respecting and other-respecting adults."

While this sure seems true, I note that her fellow economists have been preaching the preeminence of proper incentives and disincentives to channel good outcomes. For a long, long time.

Maybe what nags is the odd emphasis. Good laws and institutions nurture moral men and women; moral men and women protect good institutions and the rule of law.

Not just the chicken; not just the egg.

I certainly agree with McCloskey's finale: "Statism was a mistake. We need governments for a few good purposes, such as protecting us from Russian nuclear extortion. But in a world of greatly varied human gifts and irremediable conditions, the statists' promises of equality of outcome or of opportunity are not even approximately feasible."

But what is the occasion for this talk about "too many people" not respecting their very own selves and others?

The clue is her only reference to a contemporary person: "Childish pride and envy, grabbing more of the sweets, Donald Trump-style, do not make for a good society."

Agreed. Yet, even the tiniest suggestion that Trump is the sole exemplar of vice obscures widespread, ongoing, and bipartisan fraud in our politics . . . *before* Trump, *in-between* Trump, *with* Trump. Billions and billions [I hear Carl Sagan] in complete ripoffs in Minnesota and California and elsewhere. *Not* by Mr. Trump.

We need to place limits on presidential powers. Not just on Trump, but on every future president. And if I were President Trump, I would do all I could to expose and prosecute the massive government fraud industry stealing billions from Americans.

This is Common Sense. I'm Paul Jacob.